

# Leader steps down to fight expenses charges

A LEADING Conservative is fighting to save his political life after being charged with theft over his parliamentary expenses.

Lord Hanningfield has resigned as leader of Essex County Council after being charged with theft in relation to expenses claimed for serving in the House of Lords, where he was the Tory shadow minister for local government.

He is accused of dishonestly submitting claims "for expenses to which he knew he was not entitled" - including overnight stays in London.

The 69-year-old peer, who was born Paul White and grew up in Chelmsford, claimed £99,970 in overnight subsistence.

Educated at King Edward VI Grammar School in Chelmsford, he gained a Nuffield Scholarship for Agriculture and soon after became a livestock farmer before making his name in local politics, becoming a county councillor in 1970 and eventually being awarded a peerage in 1998.

He said he had made the decision to step down from his job as leader of Essex Council, which he undertook a decade ago, to allow him to defend the charges.

He said: "All the claims I have ever made were made in good faith. I have never claimed more in expenses

than I have spent in the course of my duties.

"I have co-operated with the police throughout their inquiries.

"I am extremely disappointed to be charged and I totally refute the charges and will vigorously defend myself against them.

"To avoid any embarrassment or distraction for my

party, I am standing down from my frontbench duties in the House of Lords and am resigning as leader of Essex County Council."

A statement from Conservative Central Office said he had been suspended from the parliamentary party.

Lord Hanningfield is one of four politicians to face charges. The others are all

Labour MPs - Elliot Morley, Jim Devine and David Chaytor. All four will face charges of false accounting under section 17 of the Theft Act 1968. Anyone convicted faces a maximum sentence of seven years' imprisonment.

They are due to appear on 11 March at City of Westminster Magistrates' Court.

Former deputy leader Cllr Peter Martin, who represents the Chelmer ward in Chelmsford, has been named new leader of the County Council after a meeting of Tory councillors on Tuesday.

■ Lord Hanningfield.



## news in brief

### Site sold for more than £2m

THE former HM Customs and Excise data centre in Shoeburyness has been sold to South Essex firm, Medicart International Ltd close to the asking price of £2.75m.

The Data Processing Centre, built in the sixties, was the former UK headquarters for the whole of HM Customs and Excise's operations in this field.

Medicart International Ltd - which employs 50 people at its headquarters in Vanguard Way in Shoeburyness - is a manufacturer and distributor of specialist medical equipment.

Medicart Director David Mason says: "It's fantastic news that we were able to secure a facility of this nature so close to our existing premises. This will enable the company to retain all existing staff and relocate with little or no disruption to the day to day business activity."

### Residents' meet

THE Tenants Federation of Barking and Dagenham will be meeting at Barking Town Hall in Town Square next week.

The meeting is on Wednesday, February 17 and starts at 7pm.

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## Adam wins race for youth chains of office

ELECTION fever swept through the young people of Southend as they picked their new Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor.

They cast 4,526 votes during a hard-fought election campaign which involved all secondary schools and colleges.

Since the campaign launch on Saturday, 16 January, the two candidates also spent a tireless fortnight sharing their manifestoes with young people at Connexions Youth Centres & sessions.

And at the end of the campaign Adam Connolly, who won 58 per cent of the votes, was elected as Youth Mayor.

Adam 17, is currently studying for his A Levels at Southend High School for Boys.

Meanwhile, Alex Bright, who won 42 per cent of the votes, was



■ Adam Connolly, Mayor Brian Smith; and Alex Bright.

elected Deputy Youth Mayor.

Alex is 16 years old and currently studying for his A Levels at Southend High Schools for Girls.

Mayor of Southend, Councillor

Brian Smith presented the winning duo with their ceremonial chains of office.

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council's Executive Councillor for Children and Learning, Councillor

Roger Hadley says: "Congratulations to both and we wish them every success throughout their year of office, and hope they thoroughly enjoy this very special experience."

"By running such energetic election campaigns they have already more than proved their commitment to hard work."

"We are very proud of our Youth Council in Southend, which gives our young people a vital and well-respected voice."

"These two key roles at the head of the organisation are highly prestigious and responsible."

"It is truly excellent that so many young people have taken the trouble to vote in these elections and are thereby already realising the great importance of the democratic process."